

Giga Zedania

## National Form and the Question of Identity

Notwithstanding the fact that the topic of the conference, the birth of the Georgian nation, seems to suggest that empirical and historical researches would be more relevant for it than philosophical reflections, I will still attempt to look at the task from a philosophical perspective. And I will begin with a philosophical dictum: it can be claimed that the discussion about the origin of the nation implies an anticipation of the end of the national form. To quote a famous phrase from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*<sup>1</sup>, the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk. Those innovative researches, without which one can hardly imagine any discussion about nations and nationalism today, have been produced during the past 50, especially, past 25 years (I will once again name some of those who we have repeatedly quoted during this conference: Anderson, Gellner, Smith, Hobsbawm, Brubaker). When the signs of decomposition of the national form are clearly seen, one starts thinking where it originated and what was its origin<sup>2</sup>.

For the start I will offer a definition of identity, which fully complies with the Aristotelian requirements for the definition (i.e., as we may recall, species is defined with the help of genus and specific property): *Identity is a form of sameness based on self-interpretation*. Etymologically identity, *identitas*, comes from the word *idem*, the same. But unlike those forms of sameness which are characteristic for, say, objects, identity implies the sameness which is characteristic for the “self-interpreting animal” (that is how Charles Taylor defines the human being). Identity means not a set of objectively given features but rather *my relation* towards “a set of features”. The relation depends on understanding, interpretation. This definition is formulated with a view of avoiding reductive understandings of identity<sup>3</sup>.

I would note here that the popularization of the concept of identity itself took place in the 50s of the previous century. Erik Erikson, a renowned psychoanalyst, playing a decisive role in the process, introducing the concept in order to apply psychoanalytic categories to historical and social processes<sup>4</sup>. The syntagm “identity crisis”, as far as I know, was coined by him. It referred to the inability of the American society of his times to provide its members with an identity which would enable them to overcome conflicts of childhood and adolescence.

One could distinguish individual and collective identities - the individual comprising the domain of the experiences related to one's own body, as well as the entirety of one's own social roles; the collective identities are: reli-

gion, gender, ethnicity/nationality, sexuality, race. The collective identity necessarily implies the *identification* with a collective image of a group. For both individual and collective identities the Other, the interaction with the Other, plays an absolutely fundamental role. I will not dwell on this issue, since it has been amply demonstrated from different quarters, starting with psychoanalysts and ending with George Herbert Mead. One's own self can only be seen through the other. This is the postulate of the unavoidability of mediation.

Two more preliminary points should be made about the concept of identity:

- a) individual identity is to a large extent defined by collective identities; the individual is defined by his or her participation in the interactive and communicative processes of the groups he or she belongs;
- b) Collective identities exist only in the individuals. I don't see any necessity to hypostasize either the concept of the collective identity or any other concept, for that matter.

Now I shall turn to the question about the form of collective identity which corresponds to the nation. If we, following Benedict Anderson, will define the nation as an imagined community, what should the identity of this imagined and imaginary community be like?<sup>5</sup> First of all, the meaning of "imagined" is to be defined. The word "imagined" could have two distinct meanings not necessarily in harmony with each other: imagined is every community which extends beyond face-to-face communication. But "imagined" is also a word for a society which is anonymous and impersonal. It is hard to estimate how successful Anderson is in distinguishing these two meanings of the word, but it is obvious that his definition of the nation is interesting only in the case if he uses the term according to this second meaning. This implies that one can designate the community as imagined, if it needs for its reproduction anonymous, impersonal institutions<sup>6</sup>.

One of the functions of these reproductive institutions is to produce an ideological effect. Ideology here is understood as a means of imaginary resolution of real problems<sup>7</sup> (Whether one could draw a parallel between the "imagined community" and "imaginary resolution"? This is to be farther explored). There certainly are societies where narration occupies the place of ideology; in most cases narration and ideology are intertwined and complement each other (ideology is conceptual, while narration does not imply conceptuality). Accordingly, ideology would be an integral part of the national form, with the aim of imaginary harmonization of the problems of community united within this form. Problems and tensions may be of various types: class, inter-communal or fundamental-existential.

Bearing in mind this conceptual framework, I would like to turn to the texts by Ilia Chavchavadze - no matter whether we regard him as the founder or the restorer of the Georgian nationalism - it is a fact that from his very first texts, both fictional and journalistic, he pursued the key goal of establishing such a nationalist ideology. Let us look at his main prose texts from this perspective. The culmination of the text in *The Traveler's Diaries* is the conversation of the author with Lelt-Ghunia. The conversation concerns precisely the question of identity:

“There on Terek’s banks stands a fortress not built with hands. That fort is well known as Arshi’s fort.

— How is it not built with hands?

— It is built by God, impregnable, not to be broken.

— Then what wouldst thou say?

— In other days Kakhetian army attacked it, fought, and took it. The glen thought to get help from the terrified lord. He could give them none. A great number of people were slain, The Kakhetians massacred man glensmen, they came into the fort, pulled down the standard. There was an old glensman there, a man famed for his wisdom. He had a daughter, not betrothed, unseen of the sun. This glensman decided to make the Kakhetian soldiers drunk. He brought wine and sent it into the fortress. He also sent his daughter, unseen of the sun, to the drunken feast. The Kakhetians, thirsty of wine, admirers of fair women, became as swine, and were completely drunk. The maid discovered the keys of the fortress and let the glensmen know of the swinish state of the Kakhetian soldiers glensmen came and entered the Castle unperceived, raised cries and masacred all the drunken Kakhetians. Again the fortress fell into the hands of the glensmen. The Eristav of Aragva heard of this. He gave the castle as a reward to the maid’s father, he also gave him a charter...

— What sort of bravery was there in that?

— Why not? That is cunning; where force cannot prevail, there cunning persuades.

— What canst thou say to this massacre of Kakhetians?

— Now all Georgians are brothers. I am not speaking of Kakhetians in enmity. This I want thee to understand, that formerly if we gave our lives in service there were rewards, there were great gifts; we found our livelihood in glory and in deeds of heroism, a man did not live in vain. Now we have to find our livelihood in lying, immorality, perjury and betraying one another.”<sup>8</sup>

I would like to draw the attention to the fact that here we see a sort of performative contradiction - Lelt-Ghunia speaks in a regional dialect and, moreover, speaks of animosity and fight between Georgia’s various regions. What is remarkable is that through this the narrator wants to express the

national identity. I would hereby recall that the main function of a national identity is the homogenization of carriers of this identity, their unification according to a national feature, the downplaying of the conflicts within the nation; hegemonization, to apply a neo-Marxist term.

Looking at such prosaic works by Ilia Chavchavadze as *On the Gallows*, *The Tale of a Poor Man*, *Otar's Widow*, one will see the transformation of the same problem. First, we deal here with the effort to neutralize a class conflict by the national form, which in each case is doomed to failure. Apart from the class conflict, however, some texts contain what Benedict Anderson refers to as "fatality" (suffering, disease, death) as a thematic problem. Anderson associates the birth of a phenomenon of nationalism with the weakening of the importance of the Christian religion as the grand narrative of legitimization, which is being substituted by national narrative which should take over the function of interpreting and justifying the fatalities. But these fatalities also remain 'unresolved' and 'without sublation' in Chavchavadze's works, especially in *Otar's Widow*.

One may argue that if Ilia's texts do not show an imaginary resolution of real problems, this might not have been the goal he pursued. But this would be a wrong assumption. In *Otar's Widow* again we see the effort of this resolution - the well-known passage towards the end of the work, in the dialogue between its two personages, Archil and Keso, is nothing else but the attempt to provide the solution to the real - class-related - problems on the level of the imaginary. But the resolution here is given in the future as a promise. The promise is always an expression of an excess, of a utopian energy which should mobilize; but at the same time it reflects an incomplicance of the situation in which it emerges to the desired one. I would note here that Chavchavadze, who is unequivocally perceived as the father of the Georgian nationalism both by Georgian primordialists and modernists, with all its psychoanalytical connotations, provides a much weaker form of the national narrative than one would imagine. I would like to stress the fact that here we deal not with a deconstruction of a strong narrative, where signs of weakness would have been discovered in the demonstrations of its strength, but the admittance - especially in his later works - that this strong ideological dimension of the national narrative cannot be materialized (of course, I understand that such a direct link between fictional texts and political processes is problematic, but a linking phenomenon between them is the ideology, which justifies this link, though perhaps not the speed with which I established this link).

How does ideology work? It transforms identity - not as a result of hovering conceptualization or narrative but as the product of its institution-

alization (I would note here that this institutionalization basically takes place in mass media and schools). Two things are important for a philosopher here: the ideology leads not to the explication of identity (i.e. exposing that which exists implicitly, latently) but rather imagination or invention. Here one should distinguish between approaches that stress invention and fabrication (Hobsbawm<sup>91</sup>) and those that accentuate imagination (Anderson). The point is that the birth of any nationalism is directly linked to the phenomenon of the alien – the alien, which is not external and accidental for this identity but represents an essential moment of it. Accordingly, an alien is embedded in a national identity as something that makes this identity collect and unite. This process of unification and establishment will never be the identical with that initial condition when the contact with the alien did not exist. Following the law of philosophy, the expression is always more than what is to be expressed – because the expression brings in the universe of concepts and meanings that cannot be controlled by any subject.

National form is not of one type. In the literature usually two types of nationalism are distinguished – ethnic and civic. Which of them will develop depends on whether the birth of a state precedes the development of a nation or follows it. For example, in France the birth of the state was followed by the birth of the nation, therefore, the nationalism developed within the state and its institutions. France, then, is treated as a paradigm of civic nationalism. In Germany, on the other hand, the stir-up of national sentiments preceded the birth of the state and therefore, it took an ethno-cultural form. The issue of membership of these two communities is determined accordingly: in France it is political belonging, i.e. citizenship, while in Germany it depends on the ethnic origin. As Brubaker notes, in Germany the “imaginary community” of nationhood and institutional realities of statehood were clearly separated; in France they are welded. In Germany, nationhood was an ethno-cultural fact whilst in France it was political<sup>10</sup>.

This difference is an interesting one. But lately more and more voices argue against it. One of the reasons of criticism is that the distinction between a “good” civic and “bad” ethnic nationalism does not seem to be fair. E. g. result of a “good” civic nationalism is the policy of assimilation of minorities – the example of France). But a more important argument is the following: nationalism necessarily presupposes an ethnic ‘moment’ for designating the common origin and the common descent. The phenomenon, which is being described by the term ‘civic nationalism’, is nothing else but the loyalty towards the state or patriotism. But this does by no means imply that the origin of nationalism does not affect its character. The tendency of the Georgian nationalism towards “ethnic character” is to be explained by its

origin - when there was no possibility of equating nation with the state - as was the case for Georgians in the Russian empire - language, ethnicity and religion were taken as the defining moments of identity. If we look at today's Georgia, we will discover that it is the ethnic nationalism, characterized by aggressiveness, in reality hinders the formation of the state in the country - precisely for the reason that it still bears the mark of its origin and development within the empire. We could describe this distinction as the one between "etatist" and "cultural" nationalisms, in order to avoid confusion with terms like "ethnic" and "national"<sup>11</sup>.

I have said at the very beginning that I would try to consider the philosophical dimension of the issue at hand. So I will turn now to philosophy. Since the 1960s in the philosophical discourse a very clear accent was placed on differences, plurality, conflicts - at the expense of unity. This turn to difference, apart from fundamental ontological and epistemological implications, has political consequences as well. If any form of communal unity - and nationalism here is not an exception but rather an example *par excellence* - implies exclusion, then it also implies a possibility of emancipation, thus triggering off the processes of conflicts and trespassing boundaries. This exclusion continues to this date - existence of ghettos in present social democracies or the gap between the South and the North on the global level causes uninterrupted dialectic of emancipative movements. It is precisely this dialectics that motivated philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy to raise the issue of community, which would be without community. Alienation, according to him, is caused not only by exclusion but by inclusion as well, which gives birth to the fetishism of the ideas of the unity, the one, the common. The consequences of the worst metamorphosis of this idea in the form of totalitarianism are sufficiently known. But what could a form of collective identity in such a community without a community be? Multiculturalism, which claims to offer such a form, is perceived by some as the last word of the post-modern tolerance, but it is also criticized by others as a deconstruction of the national identity (by the way, this is true not only of such 'emigrant states' (Michael Walzer) as the USA and Canada, but also of such traditional nation-states as, for example, Germany). This further complicates the situation created around nationalism. What could the framework look like, which would accommodate the citizenship *without the belonging to the unity of the cultural values*?

What could a future unity, *communitas*, be like which would no longer be based on the idea of the one, the unity, the homogeneity? One may consider this question irrelevant in contemporary Georgia, but it is related to a more concrete series of questions. But to understand this, we should take

into account the context - if nationalism is directly linked to modernity, today, in post-modern condition, we start discerning the signs of fundamental changes. The doubts about the idea of unity and homogeneity is not the only result of these changes; another is the doubt whether nation represents the necessary framework for the belonging to community and institutionalization of citizenship; and the third is that sovereignty, a concept which was directly linked to the concepts of nation as well as the state, is losing its modern meaning. For example, to recall Robert Cooper's point, the European Union is a highly developed system of mutual interference in domestic affairs down to such levels as even beer and sausages<sup>12</sup>. The problem here is not only that, as Cooper notes, the democracy is firmly tied to the territorial state (i.e. Europe will find it difficult to turn its back on national identity, national territories, national army, economy and democratic institutions). The problem for those countries which are not yet involved in the modernization process and has not yet completed the building of the state and nation - and for which the EU is both the environment and the model - is how to coordinate these processes? Is the old concept of sovereignty still valid? Does not this concept look a little bit naïve in the context of those countries which for their survival depend on foreign loans, arms, expertise?<sup>13</sup> Is the building of strong identities still required in the age of deconstruction of identities?

Someone could object that European countries have gone through these processes and each country will have to follow them if its model and goal is Europe. But is not it true that these countries are not isolated from the western world? British video clip, Brazilian TV-series, Russian talk show, American film are contributing to the Imaginary of a Georgian citizen alongside with the neighbor's gossip and parents' advices. And it goes without saying that the majority among this plurality of sources is constituted by the western information and imaginary currents, which are themselves determined by a post-national constellation (Jürgen Habermas).

These problems should first of all be perceived by intellectuals. They imply questions concerning intellectuals' role and function in this type of context. Should they work for establishing a national form when the post-national imaginary - as something unknown and promising - seems to be far more attractive? Should they take part in 'invention of traditions', one of the main traits of which is the oblivion of the fact of their 'inventedness' and 'fictionality'? Should they make their own a discourse, the limitations of which are very clear to them?

I will end with these questions. Without asking, intellectuals become ideologues. The conference was dedicated to Ilia Chavchavadze and one can

hardly find another writer in the Georgian literature so frequently ending his works with the question mark.

---

### Notes:

- 1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Frankfurt am Main 2008, p. 9: "Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Graumalt, dann ist eine Gestalt des Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau in Graulässt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur erkennen; die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug".
- 2 I am certainly aware of the fact that there are many scholars who do not accept the modernist approach to the problem of nationalism (one of the characteristic traits of which is that the origin of nationalism is to be dated as belonging to the 18th century). But one should mention that primordialist, essentialist or even less radical modernist approaches are characterised by conceptual unclearness. One example is Liah Greenfeld's attempt to find nationalism in 16<sup>th</sup> century England. In order to make this position tenable, she has to give a rather imprecise definition of nationalism: "The world ,nationalism' is used here as an umbrella term under which are subsumed the related phenomena of national identity (or nationality) and consciousness, and collectivities based on them - nations; occasionally, it is employed to refer to the articulate ideology on which national identity and consciousness rest, though not - unless specified - to the politically activist, xenophobic variety of national patriotism, which it frequently designates", in Leah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, Cambridge 1992, p. 1. Definition of Anthony D. Smith has the same problem: "By the term *nation*, I understand a named human population occupying a historic territory or homeland and sharing common myths and memories; a mass, public culture; a single economy; and common rights and duties for all members", in: A. D. Smith, *The Nation in History. Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Cambridge 2000, p. 3. These unclear definitions contrast clearly with economical and precise definitions of modernists: "Nationalism is primarily a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (Ernest Gellner) or "The nation is the largest group that shares a sense of common ancestry" (Walker Connor).
- 3 This definition is to be understood against the background of hermeneutic philosophy.



- 4 See, e. g. Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, New York 1968.
- 5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationism*, London 1983.
- 6 Etienne Balibar et Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Classe. Les identités ambiguës*, Paris 1997.
- 7 The inspiration of this definition is, of course, the structuralist approach to the study of narrative: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris 1958.
- 8 Ilia Chavchavadze, *Works*, vol. 2, Tbilisi 1988, pp. 9-32.
- 9 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1992.
- 10 Roger Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Mass. 1998, p. 4
- 11 Walker Connor, "The timelessness of nations", in: *Nations and Nationalism* 10 (1/2), 2004, p. 35-47.
- 12 Robert Cooper, *Breaking of Nations: Order and Chaos in Twenty-first century*, London 2003, p. 27.
- 13 William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History*, Toronto 1986, p. 79-80.